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ABSTRACT

The rape myth, defined as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists, is accepted by individuals from varied walks of life, including women. It has been suggested that rape myth acceptance (RMA) among women serves a protective function by enabling women to dissociate themselves from a rape victim's experience. This notion was tested by relating RMA to measures of defensiveness and perceived vulnerability. It was hypothesized that RMA among women lessens perceived vulnerability and that, if the RMA-perceived vulnerability linkage is indicative of defensiveness, it should emerge mainly among individuals who manifest a more pervasive defensive behavioral style. An expanded version of Burt's (1980) RMA scale, which included beliefs about the rapist as well as about the nature of the social setting in which rape occurs, and measures of defensiveness, self-esteem, and perceived vulnerability to rape were completed by 122 female and 56 male college students. Results from the female students revealed a significant negative correlation between RMA and perceived vulnerability. However, moderated regression analysis revealed that the relationship was contingent on level of defensiveness: the RMA-perceived vulnerability linkage emerged only for high-defensive individuals. Similar findings emerged on a measure of self-esteem (e.g., RMA related positively with self-esteem for high defensiveness), suggesting that perceptions of self-adequacy are maintained by defensive RMA. (NB)

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WHY DO WOMEN ACCEPT THE RAPE MYTH?
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It has been suggested that rape myth acceptance (RMA) among women serves a protective function enabling a female to dissociate herself from a rape victim's experience. This notion was tested using an expanded version of Burt's (1980) RMA scale and measures of defensiveness, self-esteem, and perceived vulnerability to rape. Results for a sample of female undergraduates demonstrated a significant negative correlation between RMA and perceived vulnerability. However, moderated regression analysis revealed that the relationship was contingent on level of defensiveness: the RMA-perceived vulnerability linkage emerged only for high-defensive individuals. Similar findings emerged on a measure of self-esteem (i.e., RMA related positively with self-esteem for high defensiveness), suggesting that perceptions of self-adequacy are maintained by defensive RMA.

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WHY DO WOMEN ACCEPT THE RAPE MYTH?

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Since the pioneering work by Burt (1980) and others (Feild, 1978; Kalven & Zeisel, 1966), considerable attention has been focused on rape myth acceptance (RMA). The rape myth, defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt, 1980), is accepted to a surprising degree by individuals from varied walks of life (Malamuth, 1981), including women (Barnett & Feild, 1977; Warshaw, 1988).

Because it is men who rape, research on RMA has dealt almost exclusively with male subjects (e.g., Burt, 1978; Malamuth, 1981; Muehlenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985). Acceptance of the rape myth among men reflects a generalized cultural background of sexual conservatism, adversarial sexual beliefs, and the acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980). RMA has been linked with the propensity to rape (Malamuth, 1981) and the act of rape (Burt, 1978; Wolfe & Baker, 1980). In this regard, it has been suggested (Malamuth, 1981) that RMA provides men with justification for expressed tendencies and actual behavior.

It is not clear why women accept the rape myth, however. Burt (1980) reported similarities between men and women in attitudinal variables that relate to RMA. But, there are anecdotal reports (Bart, 1979; Warshaw, 1988) to suggest that, among women, RMA may serve a protective function enabling a female to dissociate herself from a rape victim's experience. According to Bart (1979), to live with the knowledge that not only are all women vulnerable to rape, but that frequently they are raped by men they know is difficult. If, however, a woman believes in fact that only bad women can be raped and only "crazy" men who are strangers are rapists, then she can feel safe.

The present study examined this notion by relating RMA to measures of defensiveness

and perceived vulnerability. It was hypothesized that RMA among women lessens perceived vulnerability. Further, it was reasoned that, if the RMA-perceived vulnerability linkage is indicative of defensiveness, then it should emerge mainly among individuals who manifest a more pervasive defensive behavioral style. This hypothesis was tested through the development of an expanded version of the existing RMA measure (Burt, 1980). The original RMA scale emphasized beliefs about the attributes of the victim (e.g., promiscuity, bad reputation); in the present study the content of the scale was broadened to include beliefs about the rapist as well as the nature of the social setting in which rape occurs.

METHOD

Subjects were 122 females and 56 males enrolled in introductory-level behavioral science courses; mean age for the sample equalled 21.0 yr., with a range between 17 and 28 yr. Students anonymously completed a survey which included a variety of personality measures along with a questionnaire dealing with rape. Assessment of RMA: the measure of RMA was derived from a 34-item, 7-point Likert scale which tapped beliefs about the victim (e.g., "In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation"), the rapist (e.g., "Rapists are often average, everyday people like the rest of us" - reverse-scored), and the context or setting in which rape occurs (e.g., "If he hasn't used a gun or knife, it probably isn't fair to call it rape"). Seven of these items were taken from Burt's 19-item (1980) instrument; the remainder were developed from a variety of sources dealing with the rape myth (Barnett & Feild, 1977; Brownmiller, 1975; Warshaw, 1988). On the basis of item-total correlations performed on data collected in the present study, 18 items ($r_s \geq .50$) constituted the RMA scale employed in the test of our hypothesis. Cronbach's alpha for our 18-item RMA scale equalled .92. Descriptive statistics for the scale include the following: $M = 41.22$, $SD = 18.18$ (Total Sample); $M = 38.39$, $SD = 15.89$ (Females); $M = 47.39$, $SD = 15.19$ (Males). Assessment of Perceived Vulnerability and related variables: At the end of the RMA scale females were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. "Think of women like yourself, that is, women with your values and traits or characteristics. Do you think it's possible for a woman like yourself to find herself in a situation where a man forces sex on her against her

will"?

(On a the scale from 1 to 5, where "1" represents Not at all possible and "5" represents Very possible, please circle a number to indicate your answer).

2. "Have you personally ever had an experience where a male forced sex on you against your will"? (Yes, No).

Males were asked to respond to Malamuth's (1981) LR (likelihood of rape) question: "How likely do you think it is for a male such as yourself to rape someone if he was assured of not being caught and punished"? Responses to the LR question are made on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not at all likely" to "Very likely".

Both females and males were asked to indicate if they personally knew a female who was the victim of a sexual assault or rape, and if they personally knew a male who was charged with, or found guilty of, sexual assault or rape. Assessment of Defensiveness: defensive behavioral style was assessed by the 33-item Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (M-C Scale; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Items comprising the M-C scale are constructed in such a way that responding in a socially desirable direction requires dissimulation as well as positive self-description (Millham & Jacobson, 1978). The unrealistically positive presentation of self and unwillingness to admit even very common social transgressions is interpreted as test-taking defensiveness and indicative of a more pervasive defensive behavioral style (Davis, 1987; Millham & Jacobsen, 1978; Weinberger, Schwartz, & Davidson, 1979). Additional Personality Variables: respondents completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and Rotter's 29-item measure of locus of control (Rotter, 1966).

RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS

Because our study focused on women's acceptance of the rape myth, principal findings for the subsample of females will be discussed for the purposes of this summary.¹ In partial

¹ Briefly, consistent with previous work (Malamuth, 1981), RMA among males tended to relate to the LR measure, $r = .202$, $p = .14$. (It is noteworthy that the LR measure was negatively and significantly correlated with defensiveness, $r = -.459$, $p < .01$). RMA was not related to personal knowledge of victims or rapists, but it did relate to an external locus of control ($r = .256$, $p = .06$).

support of the hypothesis for this study, females' RMA scores demonstrated a significant, negative correlation with perceived vulnerability, $r = -.333$, $p < .01$. RMA relationships with experienced rape and personal knowledge of a rape victim or rapist were indexed by point-biserial correlations: a reliable relationship did not emerge between RMA and experienced rape² ($r_{pb} = .137$), but personal knowledge of others' victimization³ was associated with RMA, $r_{pb} = .213$, $p < .05$. (Note: RMA was not associated with personal knowledge of a male who was charged with or found guilty of sexual assault or rape). Of the personality variables, RMA correlated only with self-esteem ($r = -.202$, $p < .05$); it did not relate to locus of control or defensiveness.

The moderator role of defensiveness was examined using a regression model. This model tested the significance of the incremental variance in perceived vulnerability due to the cross-product term, RMA x Defensiveness, when added to the combined, direct effects of RMA + Defensiveness. A significant increment in R^2 ($df = 1, 118$, $p < .01$) equalling .069 was obtained, and a subgroup analysis was performed to explore the nature of the interaction. M-C scores were split at the median ($Mdn = 15$) and product-moment correlations were computed between RMA scores and perceived vulnerability. Results demonstrated a nonsignificant coefficient among females low in defensiveness, but a significant relationship within the high-defensiveness group, $r = -.487$, $p < .01$. Thus, in accordance with the hypothesis for this study, the RMA-perceived vulnerability linkage is indicative of a pervasive defensive behavioral style.

Finally, a moderated regression analysis was also performed on self-esteem and locus of control. Significant incremental variance due to the interaction of RMA x Defensiveness was obtained on the measure of self-esteem, R^2 Change = .041, $df = 1, 118$, $p < .05$. Subgroup analysis performed among high- and low-defensive subjects showed that, as defensiveness

² Twenty-two percent of the females reported an experience where a male had forced sex against their will.

³ Forty-nine percent of the females reported that they personally knew someone who was the victim of a sexual assault or rape.

increased, the correlation between RMA and self-esteem became significantly positive: the correlation among high-scoring individuals equalled .296 ($p < .05$), while the coefficient for low-scorers was -.008.

Apparently RMA among women can serve a protective/defensive function which lessens perceived vulnerability to sexual assault or rape. The net result is the maintenance of positive self-evaluation and a perception of self-adequacy. Though it was expected that a sense of internal control would also be a product of the RMA-defensiveness linkage, a reliable effect did not emerge on the locus of control measure.

Nevertheless, our findings raise questions that warrant additional work in this area. For example, can defensiveness increase risk? In a study reported by Gerrard, Kurylo, and Reis (1990) (cited in Baron & Byrne, 1991) defensiveness in sexual attitudes (erotophobia), coupled with high self-esteem, resulted in poor retention of sexual information about contraception and AIDS. Translated into the present context, it is conceivable that RMA, in the service of a pervasive defensive behavioral style, acts to reduce attention to/retention of information concerning rape prevention. The need for further work in this area is also highlighted by the observation (Warshaw, 1988) that women jurors are often especially harsh on victims who have suffered rape. Present findings suggest that the case for the victim may well depend on the extent to which the voir dire process can account for individual differences in RMA among potential female jurors.

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